

Pre-K Teach & Play Practice Point

Effective Use of Visual Supports

Visual supports can be used anytime, anywhere, and for a wide variety of reasons.

For example, visual supports are **useful** when:

- Children may not understand how much longer they have until their turn
- Children are learning to play with toys with increased complexity
- Children are struggling with adjusting their responses when rules differ at home, at school, and in the community

Visual supports can be used to help children **identify the steps needed to solve a problem** or to **devise a plan** in terms of where they are going to play and what they are going to do when they get there.

Visual supports can also be used when there is a **misunderstanding** (or potential for it), or even when there are multiple choices that may be **overwhelming** through auditory channels (i.e., the information is delivered in a way that is too limiting for the child to process),

Visual supports can also help when a child is **experiencing a strong emotion** and need help to regain a more neutral emotional state.

HOW TO USE VISUAL SUPPORTS EFFECTIVELY

My colleague Barbara Avila from [Synergy Autism Center](#), an expert in working with children and students with autism, shares that visual supports make the “unpredictable, predictable.”

Barbara suggests using visual supports that **range** from concrete to abstract, and from simple to complex.

- *Actual objects*
- *Photos*
- *Drawings*
- *Colored line drawings*
- *Black and white line drawings*
- *Written words*
- *Written phrases*

Regardless of type of visual support, and/or situation, Barbara reminds us to keep in mind that their use should be “simple, short, and straightforward”.

Barbara also encourages use of what she calls, the Sun Diagram visual support strategy, to help children deal with strong emotions.

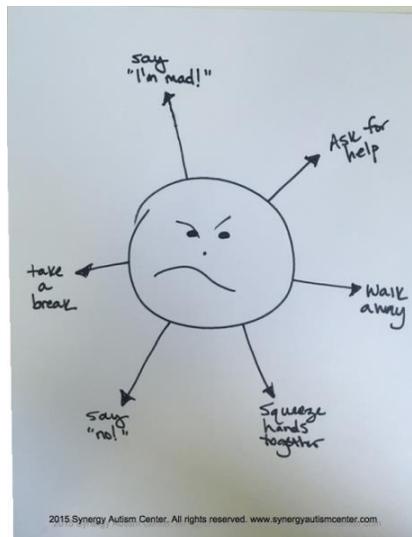
SUN DIAGRAM VISUAL SUPPORT STRATEGY

Situation: Child experiences a strong or somewhat overwhelming emotion (e.g., frustration, anxiety, excitement, or even boredom).

Grab a piece of paper, or your smart phone, and quickly draw a picture of a sun (circle in the middle with lines coming out from the circle).

You can also have a few of these that are premade in anticipation of strong emotional situations. Go to <http://prekteachandplay.com/shop> to access several premade sun diagrams.

Inside the circle, draw a face that represents how the child is feeling (e.g., bored, frustrated, excited). Then, on the “rays” include statements or even additional visuals that remind the child what they can do or say when they are experiencing a strong or overwhelming emotion. Invite the child to help provide solutions for each of the “rays.”



During the situation, a teacher or caregiver can then say, “Remember when you get bored you can ask for me to play with you” or they can say, “You look frustrated, let’s look to see what you can do, such as asking for help, taking a deep breath, or choosing to play with another toy.”

WHAT TO AVOID WHEN USING VISUAL SUPPORTS

What we want to [avoid when using visual supports](#) (e.g., charts and cards), particularly when used in public ways, is instances that cause children to:

- experience shame or humiliation
- be confused by what caused a change in their status
- be unsure what to do differently next time
- be bullied by others or incited to act out
- be rejected by peers